

Preface

This is a story that began in 1979 around and through the confines of Omaha Central High School, amidst adversity, demands and sometimes heated rhetoric. It then began again near the quaint little Cedar Hills Golf Course with an embrace of sincerity, respect and tearful acknowledgement. There is four sides to the building where it all happened, four sides to my life, and four sides to the story that I am about to tell.

They say that there is a gift in sharing, and this book is written to share with you a heartfelt letter. A letter that poured out one crisp cold November day in 2003. It is written from me to Dr. G.E. Moller and it speaks of appreciation, acceptance and overdue gratitude. The letter praises a life, honors a life and helped one also. It praises the life and enthusiastic greatness of one Ben Hofmeister, it honors the life of a dedicated leader, Dr. Gaylord E. Moller, and it helped the life of a once lost coach, just by writing it.

What is this letter? Why was it written to Doc? Why was it written by me and how was it inspired by Ben? The answers to these questions are hidden deep within four distinct walls inside a complex menagerie that spans nearly a quarter century. They are deeply rooted answers discovered inside a letter, Doc, me and Ben. Four distinct stories, told from four exclusive perspectives, all traced back to an origin that formulated within the parameters of Omaha Central High School. One story began in a housing project inside the jaws of 1950's Louisiana; while the other was weaving through the plains of western Nebraska. A chance encounter in Omaha, Nebraska would bring them together, until a puzzling request for transfer would cut them apart. Separated for nearly a decade, one would vacate an educational kingdom after 32 years, while the other created his own inside the world of golf. There they would find each other again at the dawn of a new century. It was the year 2000, the new millennium came with much joy but by the third month it also brought much sorrow, grief and unspeakable pain. A pain that would send one to explore the paradise of the Caribbean, while the other retired to grandpa land. They were disconnected again, before finally permanently bonding forever at a peaceful plot of Evergreen land called H-West.

Chapter 5

MADE IN THE CHS

The downtown school that could



Top row: Susan A. Buffett, Peter Kiewit, Ed Zorinsky, Henry Fonda, Larry Station
2nd row: Alan Heeger, Dr. Jack Lewis, Ahman Green, Susan T. Buffett, Jarvis Offutt
3rd row: Roger Sayers, Dr. Jerry Bartee, Dorothy McGuire, Kenneth Stephan, Dr. Albert B. Crum
4th row: Charlie T. Munger, Gale Sayers, James Fous, Dick Holland, Brenda Council
5th row: Lawrence Klein, Keith Jones, Wynonie Harris, Inga Swenson, Maurice Ivy
See personal biographies of each in the final back pages of the book.

Tradition and Reputation

One can easily test the depth of a school by simply taking measure of the students it produces! (W.R.O.)

With alumni that seemed to span the globe, Omaha Central High School is known for producing some of the most talented people in American history. People with enormous brains and a rare mixture of even bigger hearts! Like a mother and daughter of fortune, using it more to help others than themselves; like a man of such bravery that an airbase was named in his honor; a Medal of Honor recipient; along with one of the great actors of our time. There's a Nobel Prize winner and athletes galore, including perhaps the greatest runner in National Football League history. Add to that the hundreds of doctors, lawyers, and educators, and you have one of the most productive public high schools in America. For over a hundred years a steady stream of excellence has flowed through the corridors within the four sides of Omaha Central, carrying with it excellence from the past, hope for the present, and innovations for the future. Whether it's the past, present or future, the schools' reputation and tradition is beyond reproach.

Reputation is what you earn, tradition keeps it going! (W.R.O.)

Before the 1980's the Omaha Public Schools sported eight high schools, and CHS was the crown jewel of its fleet. Back then Omaha Central was a dream ship, the Titanic if you may, with a by-the-book captain that was wise enough to steer clear of icebergs. At a time when most downtown schools around the country were being shut down, Omaha Central not only survived, it flourished. There were times when it exceeded 2,300 students and over 100 faculty members. By the beginning of the 1980's there were still 1,863 students, not including a freshmen class. It's a known fact that negative reputations and stereotypical thoughts regarding downtown schools covered the United States from the mid-sixties through the advent of the eighties. Within those two decades that negativity ran rampant in urban schools across the country, but was nonexistent at 20th & Dodge Street in Omaha, Nebraska.

Off To See the Wizard

“**G**ood morning Omaha, Nebraska!!!” I remember waking up on the first Monday morning of school and feeling as though I was in the Land of Oz. That which once was black and white was all of a sudden in brilliant bright colors. You know, those Christmastime visions of sugar plums I’d heard about all my life, dancing in one’s head? Well now it was happening, in late August.

There were three **firsts** going through my mind that morning. This would be my **first** official check-in at Omaha Central High and I felt like a **first** grader on his **first** day. Can you believe it? A lowly soul from the Jim Crow South was now a teacher and the head football coach at the largest and most prestigious high school in all of Nebraska.

I tell you, it was dreamland that morning. After eight years of working in the public school system in Omaha, Nebraska, I’ve been selected as the first black head football coach of a predominantly white high school, in the history of the state. On that day I felt as though I had just arrived in America. I was glowing with pride. This was a euphoric feeling that may not resonate in the minds of some. However, to most in this great state, it is understood that football is king, and the most universal connection to the variety of people who call it home. In fact, outside of actual religion, nothing is more sacred than our beloved Cornhuskers’ football program here in Nebraska. On that day, in some strange way, I felt a part of it all.

As the new head football coach at Omaha Central High School, I was the centerpiece for new football hope at what is truly a very special place. To add to my euphoria at the time, Central had the most diverse student body state-wide. Furthermore, it was the high school that had produced the man that I thought to be the greatest running back in the history of the National Football League, The Kansas Comet, galloping Gale Sayers! At the time I could hardly believe where I was. I was just 30 years old. Everything seemed perfect. The sky was bright and there was a sweet smell in the morning breeze. I felt special and proud, it was all too surreal.

Two Fifth Graders

One night, while visiting friends, I sat down for dinner with two very talkative twin fifth graders. They were Nicholas and Zachary Keithley. The meal was great but at dessert they tried to force whipped cream on me, something I never eat. I don't think they'd ever met a person who didn't care for whipped cream so my "no thank you" spawned a very interesting debate. Somehow our conversation evolved and overflowed into a rather candid discussion about the difference between pleasure and joy. When asked about the comparison the twins went into a very serious and hesitant mode.

I could see that they were in deep thought, seeming to understand that besides me, mom, dad and two older brothers were also sitting at the table in anticipation of their response. Finally, Nicholas spoke up and in a very confident voice he said, "Pleasure is something that comes and lasts for just a little while, then it fades away, but joy is inside you, it comes from God, it's more real and it lasts forever." I was shocked at the statement and awed by the presentation. It was a deep, very sincere answer and later it sent me all the way back to my days at Omaha Central. I'd thought that being there was a pleasure but after I left, based on the young twins descriptions it must have been a joy, because it is still inside me. I still love the time, I still love the place and I still love the people. Like Nicholas said, it came from God, it's forever!

For Omaha Central football, as a staff we brought joy and it was a pleasure bringing it. That first year we lost three of the first four games but finished with three wins in the second half of the season. From there we never looked back. In just over a year after our arrival, the school whose football team hadn't experienced a winning season in nearly two decades was all of a sudden in the Class A (Nebraska big class) playoffs. The game went to a tie-breaker and we lost in overtime to Burke High. However, that night we won everywhere else and for the next 10 years, throughout the 80's we were the most talked about football team in the state. By the time we won the state title in 1984 we had become one of those well known high

*What we do in life
echoes in eternity.
"Gladiator 2000"*

Life in Belize

With my wife recently deceased in the spring of 2000, I have little reason to rush back to the states. So, I have plunged myself headlong into creating a resort project here in Belize and for these past two years it has been like home to me. I live east of downtown in Belize City, in a boarding house adjacent to the Bellevue Hotel. A walk out my front gate across a two-lane street and I am in the Caribbean Sea. We lost everything in St. Lucia when the Trade Centers went down, but then Belize came up and life has begun all over again. It's where I am today during these first days of November, three years into the new millennium.

Life here in Belize is far from routine, however I try not to ever get too far away from the regular citizenry. Belize City is an urban throw back city during the day, but a somewhat dangerous place to be at night. There is no middle class here and that shows up vividly. Jobs are scarce, salaries are sad, making the economy a tunnel without a light at its end. In fact when vacationers are walking around with two or three hundred dollars in their pockets, they have in their possession about a month's salary for the average worker. It's a known fact here that inside the wrong place at the wrong time, some have been known to try to take away that salary in whatever way they can.

A quick economical scan will show an average paying job here will constitute ten hour work days at about \$1.50 an hour US. Take that modest salary and the fact that gasoline in 2003, is more than \$6.00 a gallon. Telephone costs in Belize are more than just a chat. Local calls must be prepaid at 35¢ per minute, with out-of-the-country long distance requiring prepayment also. Phone minutes must be purchased like groceries. I usually buy the 20-minute long distance packages for \$100.00 US. Yes, that's an unbelievable \$5.00 per minute. Unlike the USA, seeing people with phones attached to their ears at 35¢ local and \$5.00 a minute long distance is a rare sighting in these parts!

In fact, shopping is crazy all around with no sense of consistency anywhere. You can find a beer for as low as 50 cents but a cake may cost you \$60.00. I saw a turkey for 50 bucks and they don't even have a Thanksgiving here!

The Year of Laughter and Tears. A Tough Time to Start A Principalship

Nineteen sixty-eight was a leap year. Some said it came with one extra day, others would say later that it brought three too many. The year started promising enough with the introduction of the outrageously entertaining show, Rowan and Martin's "Laugh In". Then it gave us our first look at the raw innocence of Mr. Roger's Neighborhood before teaching us a new way to follow the news, with a show called "60 Minutes". That year the Packers won the Super Bowl and the Tigers won the World Series. It was a bold time, complete with a thirty-three year advanced look into the future, through a movie called "A Space Odyssey 2001." Speaking of movies, the year also introduced the movie that seemed to be a novelty in Central High lore, Clint Eastwood's "Where Eagles Dare". Yes, 1968 brought all those things in the beginning but then riots, war protests and high profile assassinations took over the calendar. March 4th, April 4th, June 6th – indeed three days too many! These would be the last few months of Dr. J Arthur Nelson's 24 year reign as principal of Omaha Central High and a three month unspecified interim trial for his successor, Mr. Gaylord E. Moller.

So you want to be an urban high school principal, huh? Well, if it happens then be prepared for a diverse student body with a wide range of economic differences. The top priority for a principal in such a situation is to monitor and nurture student relations. Ignore it or neglect it and you will spend all your days sitting on a time bomb, while the explosion is eminent! Central High offered this type of diverse setting and with a lame duck principal making plans for the summer, Mr. Moller found himself as one of the leaders sitting on that powder keg.

He was charged with maintaining stability while keeping the avenues of education open during an extreme transitional period. Urban schools across the country were finding themselves touched in different ways by new laws